

Development of a validated instrument on socio-cultural and religious influences during menstruation in Malaysia

Keng Sheng Chew, PhD¹, Shirly Siew Ling Wong, PhD², Ahmad Khairi Hassan¹, Kian Ee Po¹, Norizzati Zulkhairi¹, Nurul Ammiera Lyieanna Yusman¹

¹Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, ²Faculty of Economics and Business, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Although menstruation is a physiological process, it is shrouded with socio-cultural and religious beliefs. Healthcare providers should be aware that these influences may affect how women perceive their menstrual disorders. The primary objective of this study was to develop a validated questionnaire measuring the sociocultural and religious beliefs during menstruation.

Methods: In the first stage, a preliminary list of items measuring socio-cultural and religious beliefs during menstruation was generated. In the second stage, exploratory factor analysis was performed. Finally, confirmatory factor analysis using reflective measurement model and structural equation modelling was performed using partial least squares. The practices of these beliefs were included as mediating effect. Biological symptoms of menstruation were added in as another factor.

Results: A total of 400 female students from the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia were recruited. A preliminary list of 22 items was first generated. From the confirmatory factor analysis, two factors were iteratively removed due to poor factor loadings. Four factors were retained, i.e., i) "religious beliefs"; ii) "unpleasant (or dirty) nature of menstruation"; iii) "personal restrictions (dietary and behavior)"; and iv) "restrictions of interactions with male gender". In structural equation modelling, only 2 factors, i.e., the practices of "personal restrictions (dietary and behavioural)" and "restriction of interactions with males" had significant negative impact on quality of life.

Conclusion: Menstruation should not be viewed purely from a biological lens as there are layers of sociocultural and religious beliefs surrounding it.

KEYWORDS:

Menstruation, socio-cultural belief, religious belief, quality of life

INTRODUCTION

Although menstruation is a physiological process, it is often coated with layers of socio-cultural and religious beliefs.^{1,2} Compounding this issue is the pervasive stigma in many cultures that women are discouraged to discuss menstruation matters openly.³ This is because menstruation is often perceived as an "embarrassing" issue that should be kept

hidden and private.³ This kind of social shroud can be particularly "thick" in an Asian society like Malaysia.²

According to Young and Bacdayan (1965),⁴ menstrual sociocultural beliefs can largely be categorised into the following categories: i) the general belief that menstrual fluid is unpleasant, contaminating or even "dangerous"; ii) menstruating women may not have sexual intercourse or engaging in sexual activities; iii) personal restrictions imposed upon a menstruating woman such as food taboos, restriction of movement, talking, etc.; iv) restrictions imposed upon contact with men and things that belong to men, e.g., personal articles, weapons in ancient times, craft tools, religious emblems and shrines (where men are considered the guardians of these religious emblems); v) a menstruating woman may not cook for men; and vi) a menstruating woman should be confined to a restricted space such as menstrual huts for the duration of their periods.

Many studies (including Asian studies) have been conducted on the impact of the physiology of menstruation on a woman's quality of life.^{1,5-7} However, as alluded by Lu,¹ menstruation impact is a multi-dimensional construct. Other dimensions that have not been conspicuously described are the socio-cultural and religious dimensions. In this regard, it is imperative for healthcare providers to be aware of the impact of these influences which may affect how women perceive their menstrual disorders as well as their health seeking behaviour particularly with regards to the alleviation of menstrual symptoms. Furthermore, by knowing these influences, healthcare providers, can play a pivotal role in helping women to destigmatize and to develop a more positive attitude toward menstruation.⁸

The primary objective of this study was to develop and validate a questionnaire measuring the sociocultural and religious beliefs during menstruation. The secondary objective was to evaluate the influences of these sociocultural and religious beliefs and practices on female university students' quality of life.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

Female medical and economic students from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Malaysia were recruited voluntarily for this study. Sample size was estimated using

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Corresponding Author: Keng Sheng Chew

Email: ks Chew@unimas.my